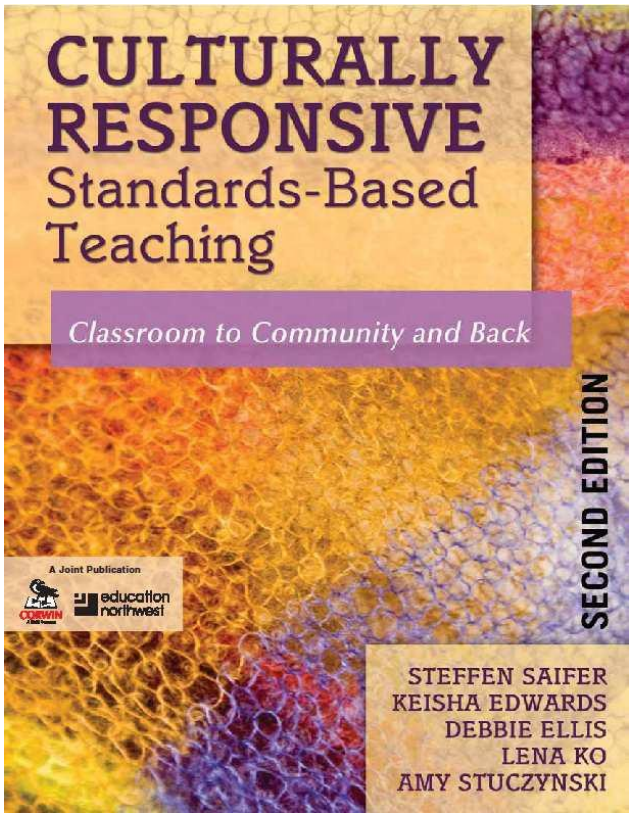
Culturally Responsive, Standards-Based Teaching: Classroom to Community and Back



The contents of this handout come from the book, *Culturally Responsive Standards-Based Teaching: Classroom to Community and Back* (Corwin Press, 2011) which offers a range of strategies for implementing Culturally Responsive, Standards-Based (CRSB) teaching —from making small changes to existing curriculum, to designing extensive projects, to developing district-wide programs. These ideas can be applied to any subject at any grade level.

Research shows that embedding students' cultures into a rigorous curriculum boosts student achievement and expands opportunities for parent and community involvement. CRSB teaching can help schools and districts—especially those that serve students from diverse and/or low-income families—accomplish these goals.

In a survey of educators who have participated in CRSB trainings and workshops, 100 percent said it provided a good process for closing the achievement gap, and more than 92 percent said they were able to make stronger connections with their students' families.

Culturally Responsive and Standards Based Together

Culturally responsive, standards-based teaching is the integration of two important aspects of education: culturally responsive teaching and standards-based teaching. Much has been written about culturally responsive and standards-based teaching separately, but it is the integration of the approaches that is critical to the goal of high achievement for all students. Culturally responsive teaching addresses the needs of students by improving motivation and engagement (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000), and standards-based teaching provides all students with the opportunity for rigorous, high-level learning. CRSB teaching means doing both, together.

CRSB teaching values students' culture, draws on that culture as a strength in their education, and challenges them with rigorous, relevant curriculum. CRSB also succeeds, in part, because it fosters deeper, stronger school-family-community partnerships, which have been shown to improve academic achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Boethel, 2003). CRSB teaching strategies foster such partnerships because they bring family and community culture into the classroom and school in meaningful ways. When curriculum content and methods incorporate local norms, behaviors, objects, and practices, students and families feel there is a direct link between home life and school life. When teachers value and use the strengths of local cultures, they send a positive message that can improve the school's relationships with family and community members.

Standards-Based Teaching

The primary drive behind the standards movement is to provide all students with the opportunity for rigorous, high-level learning. Federal requirements demand—and all educators expect—that students will achieve to their full potential. CRSB teaching is always grounded in state and local standards and the student achievement goals of the school and students. When discussing standards, we mean academic standards that are explicit learning expectations, usually written by the district or state. These are also referred to as content standards, performance standards, or benchmarks.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Culturally responsive teaching infuses family customs—as well as community culture and expectations—throughout the teaching and learning environment. By providing instruction in a context meaningful to students and in a way that values their culture, knowledge, and experiences, culturally responsive teaching fosters student motivation and engagement.

Culturally responsive teaching is built on a foundation of knowledge and understanding of your own and your students' family and community culture, which is critical to the process of teaching and learning. Learning about all the cultures represented in the classroom can seem like a daunting challenge, but the success of many teachers shows that it is worth the effort. Becoming culturally responsive is an ongoing process that evolves as we learn more about ourselves, our world, and other cultures. To become culturally responsive, first look at your own culture—especially if it is part of our country's dominant culture—from the worldview of others; have an open mind to what you don't understand; and be ready to learn new ways of looking at and doing things.

What is culture? Culture can be defined as a way of life, especially as it relates to the socially transmitted habits, customs, traditions, and beliefs that characterize a particular group of people at a particular time. It includes the behaviors, actions, practices, attitudes, norms, values, communication styles, language, etiquette, spirituality, concepts of health and healing, beliefs, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group. Culture is the lens through which we look at the world. It is the context within which we operate and make sense of the world and it influences how we process learning, solve problems, and teach.

Everyone has a culture, though most of the time our own culture is invisible to us. It is frequently thought of as the way things are and becomes the norm by which we measure all others' behavior. In The Diversity Kit: An Introductory Resource for Social Educators, the authors write, "Nonetheless, one's beliefs and actions are not any more natural or biologically predetermined than any other group's set of beliefs and actions" (Alhearn et al., 2002).

Cultural groups are not homogeneous. They represent different geographical locations, histories, and experiences. Minority cultures also express varying degrees of assimilation to the dominant Anglo culture in this country. Cultures change over time, and vary across class and gender, even between families and individuals. The music we enjoy, how we spend our leisure time, what we talk about, and what we eat are examples of individual differences within the same cultural group.

This guide looks at culture very broadly. It includes all the aspects of students' lives that could engage and motivate them to learn and to do their best work, including—but not limited to—family culture, community culture, youth culture, and pop culture. Teachers can start by thinking and learning about their students':

- Differences in ways of thinking, feeling, and expressing pleasure, distress, and concern
- Similarities in the cares and concerns of an individual or her family
- Country of origin, history, practices, health, beliefs, and language
- Frames of reference—religion, valid ways express oneself, and acceptable and unacceptable behaviors

Key Things to Remember About Culture…

~ Culture is complex, dynamic, and ever changing.

~ All humans are cultural beings. We all have several primary cultural identities that "shape" us. Important cultural identities in U.S. culture are race (including skin color), class, gender, language, religion, sexual orientation and national origin.

~ Culture, which includes values, beliefs, histories, stories, and traditions, both shapes the lens with which we view the world, and moves and motivates us.

~ When diverse cultures come together it creates a "cross-cultural zone" that is filled with a wide range of emotions, perspectives, values, beliefs, and both personal and community history.

~ Key elements/emotions in the cross-cultural zone include identity development, cultural privilege, acculturation, acculturation stress, historical mistrust, historical guilt, fear, anger, learning, and curiosity.

~ Our ability to negotiate the dynamic in the cross-cultural zone can make or break relationships and hinder or help learning.

Building bridges between teachers and students begins with simple questions: Who are these kids? What's important to them? It takes time to learn the answers to those questions and to know how they understand themselves, each other, and you—their teacher. It takes practice to ask yourself and your students' questions, and it also requires a safe and secure space to explore those questions and to share the answers.

Why focus on culture? The dominant U.S. culture is reflected in all aspects of most schools, from the curriculum to the way teachers interact with students and to how we communicate with families. Many of the lowest performing schools have a student-family population that differs culturally from that of the school, whether racially, ethnically, socioeconomically, or in some other way. For example, many classrooms emphasize individual responsibility and achievement, competition, and teacher-led learning. Other cultural groups, such as some Asian groups, Native Americans, and Alaska Natives, may be unaccustomed to this style of learning, and instead place a higher value on group work that fosters shared responsibility. Such differences may thwart learning in the school context.

Researchers have found that by the age of eight, disparities between the cultural values and patterns of communication of the home and the school may undermine children's enthusiasm for learning and their belief in their capacity to learn. This clash between a student's home culture and school culture—which is often an unrecognized, hidden barrier—can have a huge impact on that student's ability to learn and achieve. When youth, family, and community culture are included in the classroom, students feel a sense of belonging, see purpose in learning, and are motivated to do well. School relationships with families and communities improve.